

“Best Laid Plans”

December 16, 2018
Luke 1:26-38

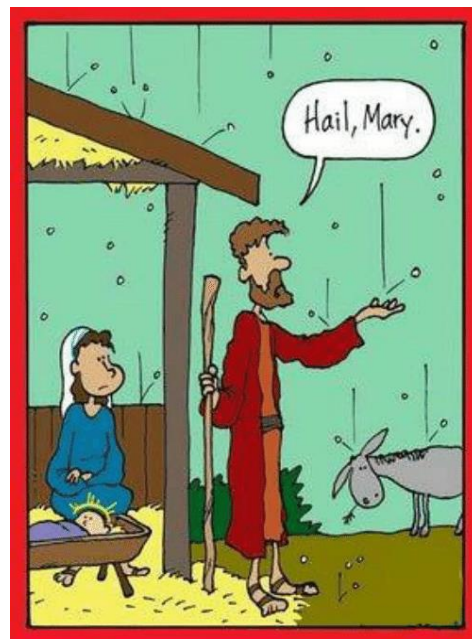
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Rock bottom can be a gift. Those in the recovery community know this to be true. But rock bottom is not just for those with addictions — rock bottom could be a health crisis or the breakdown of a relationship, the death of someone close or financial ruin. No one wants to hit rock bottom. We wouldn't wish rock bottom on anyone. I know some of you have been there, and maybe some of you are there now. If you are, I'm really glad, because you are in the right place and there is hope for you.

Here's the thing: rock bottom can be a gift. In a strange way it can be a good place, because in that place you have a chance *to choose life* ... in that place you have the chance to change. In that place your ego is nonexistent; and because you are empty you have the opportunity to fill yourself with something new. You really *can* decide to do things differently. It's in that place that you have the chance to grab hold of life and truly live. If you are at or anywhere near the bottom, know that this is not the end. It might even be the beginning!

The one we worship at Christmas also hit rock bottom. For Jesus, rock bottom was the cross. The only difference is that he went there on purpose and willingly so that he could defeat the curse of that place that wants to destroy us, and so that he could bring life, abundant life, to each one of us.

Well that's a cheery place to start a sermon on the Sunday of Joy! And a mere 9 days before Christmas! Aren't you glad you came? Here is some comic relief before I get back to my main message:



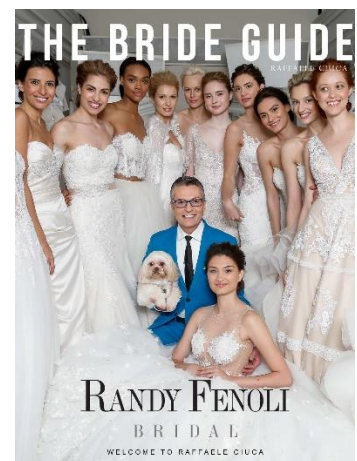
Cartoon from Inherit the Mirth

Now back to being at the bottom. Why did I start there? As I've been reading the Bible and doing devotions with those Advent scriptures, I can't help but find it truly amazing that Mary, the mother of Jesus, so willingly and so radically accepted the change and new life of bearing the son of God. After the angel Gabriel came to her and explained this new life that was to come, Mary responded with: "*Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.*"

Mary was not at rock bottom. She was nowhere near it. That's what I find fascinating! People change when they're at the bottom — people rarely change when they're at the top. Mary was full of life. She was a young woman with a future ahead of her. And it wasn't just a vague future. Mary had plans — wedding plans, to be specific.

I have done a lot of weddings — and I learned very early on not to mess with a woman making wedding plans! As the minister I put my foot down from time to time. I can't marry you if you're intoxicated, and there's been the odd song request I've turned down, but for the most part my motto is "*Don't mess with the bride!*" If she thinks it's a good idea to have a 2-year-old lead the procession by pulling a beautifully decorated wagon with a 7-month-old baby in it down the significantly sloped centre aisle of the church, who am I to argue that it might not go according to plan?? I mean what could possibly go wrong?! (That one miraculously did go according to plan and was very sweet!)

No one has plans and sets ideas about how they want that future to look quite like a bride-to-be: the flowers, the guest list, the cake, the colours I don't doubt that wedding planning was a little different 2000 years ago — Mary was probably not binge-watching 'Say Yes to the Dress!' or buying wedding dress magazines, but I doubt it was *that* different. No doubt there was an uncle she wished she didn't have to invite, and decisions about whether to serve lamb or beef to the guests. Then an unexpected pre-nuptial pregnancy changed everything.



Of course, for Mary, it wasn't just the wedding she was planning, it was her life. She had found a really great guy to marry. Joseph had a solid trade — he was a carpenter. He was a super nice guy, and just so kind to her and her family. He was a man of faith, and respectable in the synagogue and community. He was *just right*. This future before her was set and it was good. It was predictable. It was secure. It was happy. She could picture what her life would look like, and truth be told, though we can never fully predict the future, her vision was probably not far off. Life was a little more predictable 2000 years ago. Unless, that is, you were Mary, chosen to bear the son of God.

How are you when people change plans on you? How are you when people radically change plans at the last minute? (How are you when you find out you can't get into your new apartment until weeks after they originally told you you'd get in? #WallStreetVillage!) For 99.9 % of us, the answer is not good!

Partly we don't like changing plans because plans are how we control the future; at least if we plan, we can have some semblance of control. I have nothing against making plans. I am incredibly grateful to the Property Committee who have had a long-range plan for the major property issues of this church. We've just finished replacing the south roof; and that was not because some desperate thing happened, but because we had a long-range plan, and we knew it had to be done within a certain time frame. So the Building Reserve Fund was allowed to grow through the faithful donations of our members, and enough was saved up through this careful planning. When you have a church as big as this one, where parts of it



1960's... looking after it is a mammoth and incredibly difficult job.



were built in the early 1840's, and then other parts, like the sanctuary in the 1890's, and then another part in the



Things go wrong and need fixing all the time. But if we didn't plan for the big repairs we'd be in trouble in a hurry. I love how replacing the Boilers is on that long-range plan for 2035 -- even though most of the guys on the property committee will have left for much, much greener pastures by then! Long range plans and plans in general can be great. *Unless they interfere with God's plans.*

What if God's plans for your life are different from your plans? When the angel told Mary that God had a different plan than the one she had, she quickly and completely gave up her plan and replaced it with God's plan. A sudden unexpected pregnancy; the social disgrace; the risk of losing Joseph and the fear of total insecurity were enormous. The sacrifice was great, but she did it anyway. Remember, it's not that she had nothing to lose. She was not at rock bottom with the choice between life and death. I would get it a little more if she had nothing to lose. It's that she had everything to lose: husband, future, reputation, her closest

relationships, financial and physical security, certainty — and still she said ‘yes’!

God’s plans were different from Mary’s plans.

She did have a choice. When the angel Gabriel came to her and announced the news of what was going to happen, she could have said “No way José!” ... maybe “No way Jésus!” 😊 God never forces life on you. God only knocks at the door and invites you to open and to receive new life.

With so much to lose, how was it that Mary was able to say yes? Mary had humility. She was not full of herself, but full of God.

Our society is so full of self. Eugene Peterson, who wrote The Message translation of the Bible, talks about the “Sovereignty of Self”. Instead of God being on the throne of glory we have placed ourselves there. There is so, so much in our culture that tells us this is the way it should be — that our needs, and our feelings and our wants matter more than anything or anyone else. Me first! We are told over and over again when we are thinking about buying a car, or a new pair of shoes or, or ... “You deserve this!” We are also told that if life is not going well, it’s because we haven’t put ourselves first, and so we turn to self-help resources to put ourselves back on the pedestal. But that’s not God’s way.

You can’t worship God *and* worship yourself. You have to choose between God’s will and your will. One of my favourite C.S. Lewis quotes is *“In the end there are two kinds of people, those who say to God “Thy will be done” and to those to whom God says “Thy will be done.”*

Whose will do you choose? Mary’s will, Mary’s plan was lovely and good ... but nevertheless she knew that her will and her plans were no match for God’s will and God’s plan for her life. There was just no comparison! This is what she was created for. Mary’s ‘yes’ and surrender brought Life to the world.

When we step into and say ‘yes’ to our purpose which is God’s will, it will bring life to us, and it will also bring life to others. When we experience the good news, we can’t help but notice where things are broken in our own life and also in the life of the world. We can’t help but notice things that are so not right and that need to change. Like that a 7-year-old girl named Jakelin from Guatemala, could die on the border of the richest country in the world, having had nothing to eat or drink for days. Saying ‘yes’ to God means participating in greater change.

I was just reading this morning from the prophet Malachi — in the same section where it says: *“But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings”* Mal 4:2 which is quoted in “Hark the Herald Angels Sing.” It also says: *“So I will come to put you on*

trial. I will be quick to testify against those ... who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive the foreigners among you of justice, but do not fear me," says the Lord Almighty" Mal 3:5

Where are you able to see that your way doesn't begin to compare to God's way? There is just no comparison. I don't know if you have a good life with many plans, or if you have no life and desperately need a change for the better ... or if you are somewhere in the middle; but regardless, your life now doesn't compare to the healing and the life you could have if you say 'Yes!' to God's life. God's life fills us with the unexpected, but it also fills us with joy.

I want you to listen to this song called "Hey Mary" by Malcolm Gordon. And I'd like you to see where it's not just Mary who is called to bear life — each one of us is called to bear the light and life of Christ.

<https://youtu.be/PVoGcumJwng>

*Hey Mary, there's an angel in your house
Said, 'Mary have I got some news for you.
You seem to think you're nothing much,
but Heaven's coming close enough to touch, yeah!
Hey Mary, God is coming here through you.'*

*Hey __[insert your name here]__, there's an angel in your house
Said, '____, have I got some news for you.
You seem to think you're nothing much, but
Heaven's coming close enough to touch, yeah!
Hey _____, God is coming here through you.'*

*There is no such thing as ordinary now God is here
Every life and breath is blessed
You never know when God might appear.*

Thanks be to God!